

Zionism, ethnic cleansing and the Palestinian resistance - from the UN partition to the creation of the state of Israel

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On November 29th 1947 the United Nations General Assembly voted on a partition plan that would divide the land of Palestine into two regions, one for the Jews and one for the Palestinians. At that time, Jews owned about 10% of the land and constituted less than 1/3 of the population, yet they were granted 55% of mandate Palestine. The partition left the Palestinians with 44% of the land, leaving Jerusalem as international territory (Ovendale, 135). The Arabs rejected the partition, declaring a holy war the night the partition plan was passed. This was the beginning of a six- month resistance by the Palestinian people, and what can be referred to as the first stage of the 1947-1949 Arab-Israeli war (Righteous Victims, Morris, 191). The second stage began on May 15, 1948, when the state of Israel was declared. It consisted of continuous fighting between the new state of Israel and the Arab states of Transjordan, Egypt, and Syria. An armistice ended the war in March 1949 (IBID). This essay will examine the first stage of the war, specifically focusing on the Palestinian resistance and the reasons it failed to protect the territory, by looking at the superiority of the Zionist armies over the local resistance, the long time Zionist movement in relation to the military tactics, and the negligent role of the British in ensuring peace and order, which consequently aided the Jews in achieving their overall plan of obtaining as much land as possible, and evacuating the local indigenous population.

The Palestinian resistance and the Zionist army

During the first stage of the war, the conflict between both the Palestinians and the Zionists was more of a local conflict, between various Arab guerrilla factions and three main Israeli factions; the Haganah, Irgun and Stern. By looking at the dynamics of each side, it is clear the Zionists held the balance of power (W. Khalidi, Selected Documents 60). The Palestinians did not have a nationally based united military, as they did not have the political support or the economic means to form one. After the 1936-39 Palestinian revolt against the British, the population

experienced a great loss as large-scale strikes devastated the economy and the Palestinian political leadership was dismembered. Out of a population of 1 million, 5000 fighters were killed and 10 000 wounded. Among those killed were the most experienced fighters, who either died in battle or were executed by the British. Many of the members of the Arab Higher Committee, the Palestinian leadership, were exiled by the British, while others fled and never returned (R, Khalidi, 190).

The Zionist armies had been much more prepared to fight, as they were better equipped, organized and were expertly trained, in comparison to the Palestinians. The three main armies were the Haganah, the Irgun, and the Stern Gang. The military body of the Haganah, the Palmach, was established in 1941 with approximately 700 members. By the beginning of the war, the Palmach had 7000 well-trained soldiers. (Pappe, 108) During WWII the Yishuv (the pre-1948 Jewish communities in Palestine) had 20 000 soldiers who joined with the allies, and returned to fight in Palestine afterwards (Ovendale, 135). The British had openly trained 14 500 Jewish fighters, under the title 'supernumerary policemen,' who in actuality worked with the Haganah (Dimbleby, 81). The Arabs had about 40 000 fighters, and of these, only 10 000 had a level of training similar to that of the Zionist forces. Most of them were armed with pistols, rifles, and each village had a small stock of ammunition. They were using outdated arms from the era of WWI. (Ovendale, 135). Any Palestinian who was found in possession of a gun was sentenced to death under the British Emergency Laws of 1936 (Bonds).

There were two significant stages of the six-month civil war. The first stage, from November to March, marked the eve of the partition plan to the beginning of Plan Dalet, (a military strategy in which the Haganah aimed to expel the Palestinians from the land and acquire the territory). March to May, marked the second stage, the implementation of Plan Dalet to the declaration of the State of Israel. The turning point in these stages was Plan Dalet, in which the Palestinian resistance was no longer faced with, mere guerrilla attacks, but with a full-blown offensive, including the annihilation of entire villages. (Morris, Righteous Victims, 191)

During the first stage of the civil war, a cycle began where guerrilla attacks by Palestinian fighters would be followed by, or would be in response to Zionist attacks on the Arab civilian population. These ongoing attacks continued until the implementation of Plan Dalet, which marks the second stage of the civil war. According to historian Benny Morris, the Zionists were on their way to defeat if they did not change their strategy of fighting; an idea indirectly used to justify the motive of the Plan Dalet.

Plan Dalet was a plan to ethnically cleanse the indigenous inhabitants of the land and administer as much territory as possible in addition to that given to them by the partition. The Plan outlined a systematic strategy to continue and strengthen an expulsion the Zionist armies had already begun, in harmony with the Zionist agenda of achieving Eretz Israel (the land of present day Israel, the Palestinian territories, and parts of Jordan, Syria and Lebanon).

Although the Plan was drafted on March 10, 1948 and set to begin in May, acts of expulsion and colonization began much earlier. The expulsion of Palestinians began as early as the beginning of December 1947, 12 days after the partition plan passed. On March 28th, the first of the scare tactics began. The Zionist Free Radio broadcast a warning in Arabic that a spread of diseases such as cholera and typhus were to break out in April and May. It was an attempt to scare villagers, farmers, and families to leave the cities. (Bonds). Following the psychological scare, the well-known massacre of Deir Yassin was committed, where 254 Palestinians were brutally murdered by Zionist militias.

The impact Deir Yassin had on the flight of Palestinians and the resistance was immense. It created a terror among the Arab population that started a major evacuation of their land, beginning with farms, villages, and eventually entire towns. Some Palestinians avenged their anger in the name of Deir Yassin; however the overall sentiment was of fear and discouragement. (W. Khalidi, From Haven to Conquest, 765).

The Zionist agenda

The idea of transferring Palestinians from their land and the formation of 'transfer committees' to discuss this process, was endorsed by Zionists such as David Ben-Gurion and

Golda Meir. The motive was to clear the land for Jewish settlers and create a homogenous Jewish state. The Zionists expressed their plans to clear Palestine of its indigenous Arab inhabitants as early as 1930. (Masalha, 3) As Menahem Ussishkin, one of the leading figures of the Jewish Yishuv, chairman of the Jewish National Fund and member of the Jewish Agency Executive, clearly states in an address to journalists:

We must continually demand that our land be returned to our possession...If there are other inhabitants there, they must be transferred to some other place. We must take over the land. We have a greater and nobler ideal than preserving several hundred thousands of Arab *fellahin*. (Masalha, 14)

Such statements indicate that the Yishuv's tactics in the 1948 war were not a coincidence. Massacres were committed near the mixed towns even before Plan Dalet, at times in response to Palestinian attacks, but mostly constituted, according to Ilan Pappé, "unmitigated acts of brutality." (131).

Ben-Gurion's advice to the Haganah on December 19, 1947 was also adopted by the Irgun and Stern armies. As he advised:

Adopt the method of aggressive defence; with every [Arab] attack we must be prepared to respond with a decisive blow the destruction of the [Arab] place or the expulsion of the residents along with the seizure of the place (Masalha, 19)

From the end of April to the end of July, attacks similar to that of Deir Yassin were repeated, where soldiers would surround a village on three sides, forcing the villagers to leave through the remaining side (Pappé, 136). Each Haganah Brigade was given a list of villages to occupy and in most cases to destroy. The fate of most Palestinians in Arab-Jewish towns (Jaffa, Haifa, Safad, Tiberias) was expulsion (IBID, 130). People who would not leave were forced in trucks and taken to the West Bank. Psychological scare tactics also continued. In early May, in Hula Valley, Palmach Commander Yigal Allon announced to the locals, "If you don't flee immediately, you will all be slaughtered; your daughters will be raped." The result was an exodus of the entire town to Lebanon or Syria (Morris, Righteous Victims, 213).

Yosef Weitz director of the JNF and head of the Israeli government's official Transfer Committee of 1948 was aware of the limitations of land purchasing, as it would restrict areas Zionists could obtain. After half a century, the JNF had merely obtained 3.5% of Palestine

(Masalha, 21). Although there was a general agreement among the Zionist movement that transfer was necessary, three forms of transfer were debated among individuals; volunteer, agreed and compulsory (Masalha, 7). The initial strategy of buying land, which eventually changed to a policy of force, demonstrates that the compulsory method was chosen for conquest. As Weitz's diary entry on December 20, 1940 affirms:

Amongst ourselves it must be clear that there is no room for both peoples in this country. No 'development' will bring us closer to our aims to be an independent people in this small country. After the Arabs are transferred, the country will be wide open for us; with the Arabs staying the country will remain narrow and restricted....There is no room for compromise on this point...land purchasing... will not bring about the state;...the only way is to transfer the Arabs from here to neighbouring countries, all of them except perhaps Bethlehem, Nazareth, and Old Jerusalem. Not a single village or tribe must be left...And then only will the country be able to absorb millions of Jews... there is no other solutions. (IBID 21)

The declaration of Plan Dalet, a plan for military conquest using means of force and expulsion, was merely a mechanism for the Zionists to achieve their national state. Although in history books the 1948 war is sometimes depicted as a mere civil war between Arabs and Jews, the history of the Zionist movement demonstrates the contrary. The Palestinians, in fact were up against a long-term initiative with a great deal of organizational strength and international support. It is clear the agenda of the Zionists was not merely implemented for self-defence or to declare victory in the 1948 war.

The British response

The British actions during the 1947-48 war did little to maintain peace and order. From abstaining in the UNGA vote for partition to doing little in response to contain acts of violence, it is clear the British wanted to leave this 'problem' for others to deal with. Until May 15 1948 the British still ruled the country and had their units deployed in regions throughout Palestine, (Morris, Falsifying the Record, 53) yet their eagerness to transfer the 'responsibility' led to the abandonment of the people they had been occupying since 1917. By the time the British left the land in mid-May, one-third of the population had already been made refugees, while many villages were emptied and occupied by the Zionist armies (Pappe, 132). Their efforts, as an occupying and ruling power, to maintain peace, law and order were seriously lacking.

Arab pleas for help went almost unnoticed by the British. They did little to help negotiate a truce when the Arabs would propose one. On April 16, the Haganah mounted an attack on the Arab port towns, as Arab appeals for help were ignored. The British would not intervene, and after the Arab resistance in the town collapsed, the Haganah declined a truce and decided on evacuation. The British then stepped in to enforce a curfew and the villagers were sent off to Jordan and Nazareth. The Jews then robbed the empty villages (Morris, Righteous Victims, 211).

The battle of Haifa, less than one week later, reveals both the lack of sincerity by both the British and the Zionists to a genuine peace and truce. After living in relative peace for decades, hostilities between the Jews and Arabs of Haifa began during the first few months of war. The communities frequently fired at one another across the border of the town and placed bombs in each other's neighbourhoods. On the night of April 21 the British abruptly moved their troops out of this hostile situation leaving the Arabs and Jews to fight for dominant positions in preparation for a battle (Dimbleby, 89). On Wednesday April 21, Stockwell called the Haganah Command and the Arab community to formally inform them of the withdrawal. (W. Khalidi, Selected Documents, 88) However, reports by journalist Jon Kimshe state that the Jews were made aware of the withdrawal, whereas the Arabs were not. (Dimbleby, 89). Haganah representatives who Stockwell met with earlier knew the British withdrew a day earlier. (W. Khalidi, Selected Documents, 88). Taking advantage of their foreknowledge, the commanders of Carmeli Brigade began their attacks on Wednesday April 21 at 10:30 am, and the psychological war even earlier, April 19. On the day the attacks began, all attempts for the ANC to meet with Stockwell were rejected, until 9:30 pm, when he agreed to meet them the next morning. The Arab National Committee, responded to the withdrawal in a statement, noting that "if it be the sincere desires of the authorities to ensure peace and order in the town pending the departure of His Majesty's forces from Palestine, all places where clashes between Arabs and Jews are likely to occur should be sufficiently guarded by military patrol, day and night" (IBID, 91). The committee also stated that roads used by the Arabs, such as Allenby, Hijaz, Nazareth and Iraq,

were excluded from the British scheme, providing the Jews with the means to easily attack Palestinians, while roads frequented by Jews were to be safeguarded (IBID).

Stockwell would not intervene, nor would he let Arab armed men enter the town to help the citizens, unless a truce was signed. The terms of the Haganah command for a truce were, in short, unconditional surrender of the Arab population. (IBID, 94) In a series of letters between Stockwell and the Arab National Committee, the Arabs asked a few requests of the British: to minimize the evacuation of Arabs and even reverse the measures, to assume control of the whole town of Haifa in order to stabilize the removal of Jewish forces, to take action on the systematic looting of the town by the Jews and to act on the restrictions of movement the Jews had placed on the Arabs (IBID, 98). The requests went unanswered.

The resistance by the local Palestinian population during the first stage of the 1947-48 war must be looked at in relation to several factors. The disorganization of Arab leaders and of the Palestinian people was not, in entirety, their reason for failure. The superiority of the Zionist armies and the foreign training they received compared to the locally trained guerrilla Arab units must be weighed. The war cannot be looked at as an isolated incident between Jews and Arabs, but must be looked at in a broad perspective. As, the Palestinian resistance was a local reaction to a Zionist plan that began more than 50 years prior to the partition, the motivations of the Zionist leaders must be evaluated in relation to the actions of their armies. Having been occupied by the British since 1917, the Palestinians were abandoned with the mere allowance of a partition. The lack of response by the British forces completely undermined the Palestinian resistance and any opportunity they would have had to cease or reverse the outcomes of the war.

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